



Mother of transgender teen speaks up about washroom controversy

Description

Sophie Smith-Dore is tired of a St. Joseph's High School student being called a victim for his negative transphobic views demanding her transgender-daughter not be allowed to use a washroom is harassment, not victimhood.

The arrest of a grade 11 St. Joseph's high school student in Renfrew once again drew the school, the students and the question of whether transgender students should have access to the washroom of their choice under the national spotlight.

Josh Alexander, the 16-year old student who organized a protest last November against the Catholic school's policy of allowing individuals the right to utilize the restricted washroom of their lived gender identity, was informed by the school's principal that if he organized a protest, whether on or off school property, he was would face immediate suspension.

Despite the warning, the protest took place and Alexander was issued a 20-day suspension and a set of conditions he would need to agree to in order to resume his studies at school. He refused the conditions.

In January, he was issued a "Non-Disciplinary Exclusion" letter from the Renfrew County Catholic District School Board (RCCDSB) notifying him he was not allowed on school property and such action would result in him being charged with trespassing. When he returned to school on February 6, he was escorted off the property by two members of the Ontario Provincial Police, placed under arrest and charged with trespassing.

The next day, he was again arrested, but this time at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa protesting a drag show.

When he staged the November protest, he and the 30 supporters were met by a group of over 100 counter-protesters, many of them from Ottawa, Arnprior and Renfrew and the majority identified as members of various LGBTQ2S associations. Among them was Sophie Smith-Dore, founder of the Arnprior *Pflag* chapter and mother of one of the two transgender students that Mr. Alexander was

protesting against.

Tired of victim portrayal

“It is extremely frustrating when Josh (Alexander) started the protest with himself as the saviour of female students, but in actual fact trans women are four times more likely to experience violence,” she said. “While he claims to be the saviour of these two girls in the bathroom at St. Joe’s, what he is doing is oppressing the rights of these two trans girls from using the bathroom. What makes it even worse is the more he engages in trans-hatred speech the more likelihood of violence against these individuals.”

She said every time he or somebody else organizes a protest against this community, there is an arrest. Whether it is at St. Joe’s or the arrests at the NAC drag show last week, those arrests always involves a protester and they are held up like some kind of martyr in the media.

She added the school is doing its part when it adheres to its core policy to ‘create a safe, learning environment.’

“It’s on their website and the goal is to create that safe, learning environment for all students and Josh is the instigator of this harassment,” she added. “The school has no choice but to protect the kids who are being harassed, and they are being harassed by someone citing religious discrimination.”

Mark Searson, the RCCDSB director of education, said he cannot comment on the situation due to legal reasons, but also board policy forbids him from addressing individual cases involving disciplinary actions in order to protect a student’s right to confidentiality.

He did however provide some written comments regarding school policy in relation to this case including: *‘As a community of believers, we strive to reverence the dignity of the whole person. The Board deeply respects human rights and by doing so, we nurture the well-being, self-worth, and potential of each individual. On human rights issues, the Board takes its guidance from the policies issued by the Ontario Human Rights Commission and directives issued by the Ministry of Education.’*



Mark Searson, director of education of the Renfrew County Catholic District School Board. Bruce Mo



16-year old Josh Alexander was arrested for trespassing for entering St. Joseph's High School in Re

Smith-Dore said Alexander was given a set of conditions that would allow him to return to school. She admits she is unaware of all the conditions and was only informed of those that directly affect her daughter.

"I was told one of the conditions of his return was that he not 'dead name' my daughter," she said. "When you dead name, you are calling them by their birth name and not by their chosen gender. He refused. In fact, he asked to be given a name he could call them so that he didn't have to refer to them with their chosen name."

She said her daughter's legal documents and records contain her chosen name and that is how she is referred to by fellow students, teachers and staff.

"He was offended and so he asked for a nickname he could call her so that he didn't have to call her by her chosen legal name," she added. "He is not a victim here. Far from it. He was given simple conditions, one of them was referring to my daughter with her legal, chosen name. He refused."

She said when Alexander is protesting against these students saying they were born either male or female and there cannot be any differential, he is saying they cannot exist and that is calling for their erasure.

"So how can any transgender student in that school feel safe sitting beside him when he is out there protesting and advocating for their erasure," she asked. "I am so sick and tired of him being portrayed as the victim."

"These kids are attending class. These kids are following the rules. They are just trying to live their lives. Then along comes this boy citing his Christianity and his rights, and he is trying to take away their legal rights. They just want to go to school and not be harassed about their choices."

Among the notations sent by Searson were references to the Human Rights Code. One of the points he stated was: *'The Code allows for restriction of services or facilities to persons of the same sex for reason of "public decency." [118] Facilities such as washrooms, change rooms and locker rooms are typically segregated based on sex. Trans people have the right to access these facilities based on their lived gender identity.'*

She acknowledged the staff at St. Joe's consulted with her and the other parents involved and one suggestion to ease the potential for tension between the two parties was to provide a 'shadow' for the students to prevent any negative interaction between them.

"Imagine having to go from class to class with essentially a bodyguard to avoid any harassment from Josh, in case he were to call them by their dead name or a nickname and not their chosen name," she said. "Not only is it awkward and create anxiety for the kids, but just imagine if you were a student struggling with your own sexuality and you want to come out. Do you really think that is the type of environment you want to subject yourself to?"

As the founding member of the *Pflag* chapter in Arnprior, an organization founded by parents and family members of LGBTQ2S children, she said it is exactly that kind of negative stereotyping that leads to a large percentage of trans-violence and teen suicides. More and more teen suicides are committed by those afraid to come out for fear of rejection and facing the hatred of strangers and family members.

"When Josh gets arrested either at school or in Ottawa protesting a drag show, it is posted all over social media, and the comments are filled with negative transphobic comments by so many who portray Josh as the victim," she said. "Again, imagine you are a teenager who wants to let people know your self-identity and you read comments posted by an uncle or family friend and you had no idea they thought that way. It is devastating for them to find out like that."

“I want Josh to understand his actions have consequences. More and more anger is directed at the trans-community and that breeds hatred. For the kids struggling with all these pressures, it sometimes leads to a tragic ending for them, and their family and friends they leave behind. If kids are struggling, they need to know there are people out here who accept and support them.”

by Bruce McIntyre

Category

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